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COMMUNICATING MEMORY OF HISTORICAL PANDEMICS IN DIGITAL MEDIA DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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DIGITALISATION OF COMMUNICATIVE-CULTURAL MEMORY AND PROBLEMS OF ITS INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION

Abstract: The historical past serves as a reference point of contextual meaning in the present day, where communicated memory via digital media illustrates the collective lessons and memory of the past to make sense of the current times. This is currently the case, where digital news media are using news stories from mankind's historical experiences with pandemics in the making of meaning for the current COVID-19 pandemic. It is a commonly used element in the approach by media outlets in reporting on crisis situations. However, the lessons of past and present do not always align as the logic of the reporting is interpretive journalism and the wrong lessons can be drawn.

Keywords: communicating collective memory, digital media, COVID-19, historical pandemics, crisis communication.

Introduction

In the history of mankind and the history of journalism are interconnected and interact with each other, they have done so historically and continue to do so today. This is especially evident how mass media report on crises [3], often using historical examples of similar crises to try and give context and meaning to the current crisis [6]. At times the wrong lessons can be drawn from the exercise. The current COVID-19 pandemic constitutes a form of crisis, which is exerting a direct and indirect affect globally. This paper demonstrates the use of historical cases by contemporary journalism in the digital news media environment that make use of historical cases of similar health crises of epidemics and pandemics and try to apply the lessons to the current situation and context.

There is a brief definition and understanding of the two academic terms communication of collective memory and then crisis communication. After these have been defined the topic moves to the collected sample of digital news media reports that report on the current COVID-19 pandemic, but use the communication of collective memory in their crisis communication reporting to draw lessons and conclusions for the present.

Communicating Collective Memory

Olick [5, p. 346] defines the term and practice of communicating collective memory as “a sensitising term for a wide variety of mnemonic processes, practices, and outcomes, neurological, cognitive, personal, aggregated, and collective”. Heinrich and Weyland [4] propose investigating all the connections and relations, top down and bottom up to fully understand the process. However, Confino [2, p. 1403] points out that “the beauty of memory is that it is imprecise enough to be appropriated by unexpected hands, to connect apparently unrelated topics, to explain anew old problems.” These processes and relations are coded, guided and influenced by narrative creation and circulation to generate meaning making among the audience along pre-determined lines and conclusions. This is evident in the approach taken by journalists when reporting on crises.

Crisis Communication

The word crisis means different things to different people, however, there are some common aspects. These commonalities are exhibited across crisis types and locations are: a *threat to values* and norms (such as human life, identity, property, the economy, ideology and more); possesses the element of *uncertainty* (creating senses of unpredictability and uncertainty); and *time compression* (meaning that the longer a crisis lasts the more damage is done) [1, pp. 2-4]. These aspects are also projected in media reporting on crises.

Mass media outlets tend to respond to a crisis in terms of reporting the nature, progression and results of the event. Michael Granatt has devised a plan for the progression of media response to a crisis: Mayhem — this occurs in the immediate aftermath of a disaster. The media rush to the scene of the crisis to find out what, where, when, why, how, and to get images; Mastermind — the media look for relevant background information and history; Manhunt — the media seek to apportion error, fault, blame and a scapegoat; Epilogue — this occurs in the long-term aftermath and follow-up. Inquiries, trials and memorial services are covered, and reconstructions of the event and documentaries are produced. [3, p. 106]. This approach to reporting on crises is evident in recent examples of what are construed or constructed as crisis events. As an illustration of one such event from the year 2000 is provided by the example of how mass media and journalists reported on the sinking of the submarine Kursk [6]. There were historical parallels and historical lessons interpreted from historical events with the present named crisis event.

Case Study: News Sample Selection

A general Google internet search of news media articles was conducted to locate the sample of relevant articles. Each news item was checked for relevance according to the criterion of being digital news media, using collective memory of past pandemics or epidemics to generate meaning for the current COVID-19 pandemic. These search terms were applied: Coronavirus (COVID-19) + Spanish flu; Coronavirus (COVID-19) + Bubonic Plague; Coronavirus (COVID-19) + SARS. A selection of the relevant sample was used to generate an indicative result on the most used historical comparison and how these historical examples were used to generate meaning on lessons and knowledge for the current pandemic.

In the results using the search terms various articles were located and analysed. The Spanish flu occurred in the aftermath of the First World War and globally killed some 50 million people, it killed far more than even the Black Death and World War One, yet lessons and transferable knowledge was still sought (Hilotin, J., *"Spanish Flu" 1918 Vs COVID-19*, Gulf News, <https://gulfnews.com/special-reports/spanish-flu-1918-vs-covid-19-1.1582445160581?slide=1>, 24 February 2020 (accessed 14 February 2021); Spörer, S., *Coronavirus: What We Can Learn From the Spanish Flu*, DW, <https://www.dw.com/en/coronavirus-what-we-can-learn-from-the-spanish-flu/a-53261596>, 27 April 2020 (accessed 14 February 2021); Phillips, T., *"The Country is Adrift": Echoes of Spanish Flu as Brazil's COVID-19 Catastrophe Deepens*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/14/brazil-coronavirus-spanish-flu>, 14 June 2020 (accessed 14 February 2021)). An analytical article warned of making a comparison with COVID-19 as they are biologically different and that the spread pattern of the Spanish flu is not necessarily a good predictor for the spread of other viruses, in addition to the technological and other changes in society of the 21st century compared to 1918-1920 add further complexities to the comparison (Webel, M. & Culler Freeman, M., *Compare the Flue Pandemic of 1918 and COVID-19 With Caution — The Past is not a Prediction*, The Conversation, <https://theconversation.com/compare-the-flu-pandemic-of-1918-and-covid-19-with-caution-the-past-is-not-a-prediction-138895>, 4 June 2020 (accessed 14 February 2021)). A CNBC article noted similarities such as both viruses being new, no one had immunity to it and the politicised nature of the crisis events (such as a mask mandate), but noted differences in how quickly the news about the virus spread, different symptoms and the scale of the death toll (Lovelace Jr., B., *Medical Historian Compares the Coronavirus to the 1918 Flu Pandemic: Both Were Highly Political*, CNBC, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/09/28/comparing-1918-flu-vs-coronavirus.html>, 28 September 2020 (accessed 14 February 2021)). Other analytical news media articles also fact checked rumours concerning the allegation that COVID-19 was deadlier than Swine flu (2009) or the Spanish flu, and concluded that the actual numbers of infections and deaths were differing (Cox, C., *Fact Check: COVID-19 is Deadlier Than the 1918 Spanish Flu and Seasonal Influenza*, USA Today, <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/factcheck/2020/08/20/fact-check-covid-19-deadlier-than-1918-spanish-flu-seasonal-flu/3378208001/>, 20 August 2020 (accessed 14 February 2021)). Communicating the collective memory of the Spanish flu was the most widely used comparative example.

Comparative death and deadliness rankings also made up numerous stories. For example, a general approach to comparing the deadliness of pandemics across human history, where COVID-19 is ranked one of the ten deadliest pandemics in human history. Even though acknowledging the challenges of creating an accurate comparison and the low infection fatality rate of the virus (Piper, K., *Here's How COVID-19 Ranks Among the Worst Plagues in History*, Vox, <https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/21539483/covid-19-black-death-plagues-in-history>, 11 January 2021 (accessed 14 February 2021)). Various articles attempt to compare the spread and effects of historical health crises that use the Bubonic Plague (Black Death) as the reference point (Sewell, K., *Coronavirus Vs Black Death: Which is Worse? COVID-19 or the Bubonic Plague?* Express, <https://www.express.co.uk/life-style/health/1252395/coronavirus-vs-black-death-plague-worse-covid-19-news-update-bubonic-plague>,

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Conclusion

The greatest human value and fear is human life, and in particular its mortality. A "mysterious" and rapidly spreading virus in digital media news is distilling this fear by projecting the interpreted reality that there is a risk and hazard rapidly spreading in society (a virus) and that they may (often read as can) catch this virus. This personalises the emotion of fear.

Most of the articles collected, analysed and evaluated showed the systematic use of problematic comparisons of seemingly 'similar' historical crises to give context and generate cognitive meaning among the readers. These stories by their qualitative approach and selective use of collective memory are likely create a sense of fear, group thinking (lack of critical thinking) and compliance to the ineffective dictates of the governments' in their 'war' against COVID-19 and are not a check and balance of the political system to make it accountable for its actions.

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